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A few miles east of Junction, Texas, on Interstate 10, U.S. 83 turns south for 50-odd miles to reach Leahey on the Frio River. One country store midways advertising jerky and selling regular gasoline services the road.

Handsome stone entrances and green-painted game fences spell "newcomers" without ever reading the signs. I stare straight down the asphalt for fear an old family name will show on a dim sheep or hollowhorn association sign hanging on a "can't sag" gate.

My traveling partner reads aloud to steer the subject from past times. She is of the land and of the cattle, too. Yet women are saner than men. Remember the knight, ol' Don Quixote, who charged a windmill on horseback? It wasn't a "Dona" left hanging in the blades of the giant wheel.

On such stretches, I steal glances at the pastures. She allows three "gosh-a-mighty that country's hard" and one "by gawd, the red rod is broken on that mill." Limiting such observations is hard to follow. Part of the value of being on the road is enlightening conversation to relieve the tedium of ranch life.

The sheep and goats are all gone from those ranges. Once the top herds of the finest hair goats thinned the brush around Junction. Thousands of miles of fence in the

shortgrass country stands on cedar posts cut in the area. First we heard of leasing for deer hunting drifted our way from the brush country.

Other ties reached through the wool houses in the small ranch towns. Livestock medicine salesmen carried the news from house to house. Wool and mohair sales spread on west, bringing a report on how the market opened in the earlier spring country.

On this trip, as far from Junction or Leakey as possible, the car started making a dragging sound like a tumbleweed caught underneath a pickup driveshaft, except the noise was sporadic. Under 70 miles an hour, it ran quiet as the sweep of the second hand on a new Timex.

My Uncle Goat Whiskers was an automotive engineer, unmatched for working on Model A Fords. My maternal grandfather sold Model T's and gave driving lessons. The Big Boss was a stunt driver. He accomplished many feats returning from rodeo dances, club dances, ballroom dances, and polo games delayed by liquid refreshments.

So it was with great authority that I assured my partner not to fret, the grating noise was the grain in the asphalt, expanding in the heat, against the slight irregularities in the tire tread. I gunned the motor to prove my point. Told her, "See, the noise grows louder as

the tire tread heats at lower speeds." (By then the noise was like raking gravel on a driveway at 60 miles per hour.)

The third time she suggested we stop and look under the car, I told her for the third time that I wasn't going to ruin my white duck britches crawling under a hot car suffering from thermal expansion echoes. The grating sound muffled her reply.

But seeing I had won my point, I parked in the shade of a big hackberry close to a pasture gate. Each time I bent over to look under the car, the top of the bumper faded under my stomach, just as the cut of my belt buckle warned that bending too deep can lock the neck muscles in a down position.

Starting at the passenger door, she worked forward. She soon found the shield under the front end loose enough to gap at high speed. After a short course in air dynamics, she recalled the same problem with another car after parking over railroad ties in a fish house on the Coast.

Thus shamed, I searched the trunk for pliers, searched the glove compartment and under the seat for pliers. In despair, I threw an empty water bottle for a bank shot 40 feet away.

Comes next a continuation of my side of the story. While she looked for wire in the fence to contain the

shield, I chose a pair of gray striped pajamas from my suitcase to put on over my white duck pants and starched yellow shirt. Be clear, I put on the pajamas to protect my costume — to later project the image of a retired gentleman alien to sheep dust and bitterweed.

I did not then, or do not think now, the act was funny or ridiculous. Further, I am not sorry we disagreed three times out of three on where to wire the shield to the grill. I will, however, concede she was right twice of three tries.

One guy stopped just as I threw the pajamas in back. We waved him on. Once back in motion, she must have found humorous passages in her book. She broke the silence several times with loud laughter.